

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL ROBERT HOLMES,
U.S. AIR FORCE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND, VIA
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): I'd like
to welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable today Brigadier General Robert Holmes, the
deputy director of operations for U.S. Central Command. General Holmes, thanks
for joining us today. Have you got an opening statement for us?

GEN. HOLMES: I -- you know, I don't have anything prepared. But
first, Jack, I just want to say thanks for doing this. I've been on Matt and
Susan to get one of these laid back on, because for probably several months now
we haven't done one. And I had missed it and in fact a couple of weeks ago
asked our folks to get one of these set back up. So I'm glad we could do it.

In terms of opening remarks, I think you know the things that are
obviously -- take our day-to-day focus in the region, particularly in Iraq,
where we've seen some -- a situation in Basra, and we can address that later.
In fact, I'll defer to a lot of what MNF-I is seeing and doing down there, since
they're the people who own that battlespace and conduct the operation. But I'll
certainly be glad to speak to a regional perspective on that.

Then, you know, we never take our focus off of Afghanistan. What we
see there upcoming -- very, very important is the upcoming talks at NATO, the
Bucharest summit, where we look at the potential coalition partners and how
they'll factor into play in ISAF and Afghanistan for the next year or so.

The thing that I've probably here spent the most of my personal time on
is irregular warfare. And I think at some point a few months back we probably
touched on this, and at that time we were calling it effects synchronization.

We will probably, within the next, probably this week announce the
establishment of an interagency task force for irregular warfare. And what that
means is a cross-functional, cross-discipline, networked activity to integrate
and synchronize all of the elements associated with irregular warfare and the
range of, if you're familiar with the doctrine pieces on that, those activities
involved in that, and I selectively use the words activities, because we're
trying to demilitarize the notion of irregular warfare in some ways.

They're really operations but they're operations that span the DIMES
model: diplomacy, information, military, economic and societal- cultural
development activities. And there's about 10 or 11 and they span from kinetic
combat operations to non-kinetic information operations and computer net-ops and

then begin to expand into threat finance, economic development, criminalization and international law enforcement and just a multitude of things that we're becoming to realize that Sun Tzu philosophy indirect warfare is a lot of what we're about today.

Now, this is not a surprise hopefully to many of you. It's certainly not a surprise to many of us in uniform. But finally we're able to now discuss it in such a way that people are beginning to be very receptive to this idea of in the conflict we're in -- (off mike) -- if you remember the four quadrants of warfare that the QDR drew out several years ago. There was traditional and catastrophic and the other one, I can't remember what, the one that nuclear warfare was in.

But the one we find ourselves in right now, in the chaos or catastrophic quadrant, said that we would be engaged in irregular warfare, because we would be fighting adversaries, threat adversaries, that would present themselves as very globally organized networks. And that's exactly what we're in right now.

So the standup of this interagency task force for irregular warfare at Central Command is our way at the combatant command to be able to focus all of the instruments of power in order to prosecute the irregular warfight in our region.

So I'm very excited about that. And if you are, then maybe some of the questions will go toward that as we go through this.

Detainee affairs is one thing that's been on my plate here lately, as we look at what will we do with the security detainees in Iraq should the UNSCR not be renewed in December. The answer there is, you know, we've been rolling these people up in the battlespace because they were -- many at the wrong place, wrong time doing wrong things. And so they are a person of interest that needed to be detained, one, just to get them out of the battlespace, and then secondly, to glean whatever information we could in order to find other networked bad folks in the battlespace. A lot of these folks, we're beginning to educate and reintegrate into the Iraqi society and we need to continue that. But in the meantime, we've got to figure out what laws and authorities we have in order to do that.

In Afghanistan, it's a little different, but we still have a long-range problem there. And so that's another thing that I've been working here for the last few weeks.

I see a list of things that you're going to want to go over, everything from the Turkish border incursion to piracy and maybe some other questions. So why don't I now turn it over to you?

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. Well, Andrew, or -- excuse me, David, you were first on-line, so why don't you get us started?

Q Great. Hi, General, this is David Axe from War is Boring. Actually, I wanted to ask about the -- at one of the last roundtables we had, we talked to General Cone about the Afghan National Auxiliary Police and how that program is standing down. Are you familiar with that?

GEN. HOLMES: I'm vaguely familiar with it. So let me see if I can -- I was not -- I did not know that the program is standing down, but that does not

mean that, you know, it's not -- one for one -- or that I should have known, because I might not dig that deep into that.

Q Right.

GEN. HOLMES: But that was the Afghan auxiliary?

Q Right, the auxiliary police. GEN. HOLMES: Yeah.

Q The local cops.

GEN. HOLMES: Yeah. I'm with you.

Q So what's confusing me is I had seen that auxiliary police program as sort of being similar to the Sons of Iraq groups in Iraq, kind of a local security force. And I'd seen them in action in Tarin Kot back in the summer and they seemed to play an important role in being an immediate force for responding to Taliban attacks. So I wonder what's going to fill that gap if that local force goes away?

GEN. HOLMES: Yeah. Well, I think -- you know, I'm going to -- I'm going to probably come back to you with a better answer, but I'm going to tell you what I think right now.

Q Okay.

GEN. HOLMES: If it's going away, it's because we're going to use many of our trainers in a little different role, and then develop the right kinds of local concerned citizens groups -- and not to say that these weren't the right kind. What I really need to do is see what Bob Cone said there before I can give you a good answer.

Now, does that mean that we're not going to try those principles of counterinsurgency operations that we've seen demonstrated as successful in Iraq? I would say no. In my mind, we're taking the lessons learned from Iraq and will apply those as necessary. And certainly the Sons of Iraq was one of those that we learned. We also learned there's a lot of risk with that, but that should not dissuade us from wanting to pursue that.

What I'm going to do is not sidestep your question, but I'd like to get a good answer for you, and either we'll push it out via e-mail or I'll come back to you in a few days or in a week or so with another forum just like this one.

Q Okay, fine. Well, could I follow up?

GEN. HOLMES: Clearly -- sure. Because clearly, the idea of concerned local agencies is what you've got to lay down as a base for any kind of counterinsurgency, irregular warfare campaign.

Q Okay.

Well, turning to Basra, then, obviously a lot of us were sort of concerned observing that battle. How is CENTCOM going to move forward in ensuring that that kind of thing doesn't happen again?

GEN. HOLMES: Well, first, MNF-I is very much engaged on this, as you can imagine. And what we see there in my mind was a Shi'a struggle for who's

going to have power in southern Iraq as we approach the provincial elections later in the year. So there may be more of this as we see other provinces as people posture for power. It's unfortunate that in posturing for power in that situation may result in violence, but I think that's what we saw there.

And I don't want to -- I want to call it for what it was, not for what it may have appeared to everyone was that violence was breaking out all over again. (What I see ?) was this was a struggle -- a political struggle for power. And who was pulling the strings on it? There's a lot of conjecture about that. But will we see more of it? We might.

Is this a signal of -- is this a black flag? No, not necessarily, because what I tend to look at is at the bigger picture, particularly from the Central Command perspective and not getting down into MNF-I's business. From a regional perspective, we saw the government of Iraq demonstrate leadership, demonstrate responsiveness, in order to show themselves as leaders.

And probably every one of us could sit back and Monday morning quarterback. And that's what we're going to do, but at the end of the day, the Iraqi government did step forward to seek resolution. Did they seek it in exactly the manner that would be checklisted for -- in a political science class? No. Did they get A-pluses on everything, or Cs? You know, I don't know. The important thing is, they stepped forward, which is what we've been wanting and hoping for this government to do, because it's so important in pursuing the governance line of operation that we see a(n) energetic and active government of Iraq. And with Maliki down -- going down to Basra to get his hands and eyes on the situation, I think that was a good thing.

Q Okay. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Andrew?

Q General, Andrew Lubin from the Military Observer. How are you, sir?

GEN. HOLMES: Good. Andrew, how are you?

Q Good, thank you. And Captain Hasson (sp), thanks for setting this up. We've been looking for you for a while.

CAPT. HASSON (sp): Hey, how are you doing?

GEN. HOLMES: Stay on him to do more.

Q (Chuckles.) Exactly.

General, I want to talk to -- want to ask you about Pakistan, as I often do. I see when Mr. Negroponte was in Islamabad last week he was treated kind of rudely, if not dismissively. Would their new government work with us to fighting in -- fighting in Waziristan, North-West Territories, or have we kind of screwed the pooch by supporting Musharraf the past couple of years?

GEN. HOLMES: Now, I think when you look at Pakistan, yeah, there are political changes in terms of personality there. Is that -- does that mean that it's going to be -- that we've seconded ourselves because we cooperated with

Musharraf or not? I wouldn't say that. I think what we've got to do is let the political process basically situate itself and not take too much away from what might be very, very short-term vision there.

I think what you've got to do is look at those sustaining things that still exist regardless of shifts in political power. And that would be the sustained relationship with Pakistan's military, which, you know, that's not stopped. The dialogue has not stopped. Does that mean that we're trying to use that as a surrogate? By no means at all. It's a sovereign state. And we again reflect on those things that Pakistan has done over the years and remains the very staunchest ally and most active ally in the war on terror.

So I can't be -- I can't be pulled off-target by what happens from week to week, necessarily. I've still got to sustain the view regionally of, does Pakistan still stand where it did over the last four years, and in my mind, that answer's yes. So I would not -- I would not say one way or the other that anything has happened just because of changes in the leadership.

Q So General Kayani will continue to be a friend and of assistance to us then, do you think?

GEN. HOLMES: I would see no reason why he would not.

Q Great, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

GEN. HOLMES: And we need to respect that. And I mean, it's very important that as he remains our friend, that we remain his friend, and friends let friends do what friends need to do in their backyard, you know?

Q Okay.

GEN. HOLMES: And so that's the best way I know how to put that. I wouldn't -- you know, it's probably a homespun way of looking at it, but I think it's very important that we back off and understand that Pakistan is a sovereign state, and they've got the things that they need to do to work out their policies and the way they're going to do business.

Q Yeah, because they understand their backyard better.

GEN. HOLMES: Well, that's a good way of putting it. Absolutely.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. And any follow up questions?

Q Sir?

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q David again. General, so back to the Basra question. There had been some not terribly firm media reports, but media reports nonetheless, that there was a plan in place for a, quote-unquote, "surge" in the south. Specifically, these media reports named the Marines as a potential force for this surge. Was that ever a reality?

GEN. HOLMES: Are you saying that we had a plan for a surge in the south?

Q Yeah, there were stories saying that.

GEN. HOLMES: Man, I'm --

Q That's not true? (Chuckles.)

GEN. HOLMES: -- clueless right there, yeah.

Q Okay. Well, that answers the question, then.

GEN. HOLMES: One good thing about me is I'm not afraid to tell you when I'm clueless. (Laughter.)

Q Okay. Just some media reports saying that -- some of these vague reports quoting anonymous sources saying that Central Command had --

GEN. HOLMES: A surge plan for the south?

Q Right, to help reinforce the smaller -- the relatively small British army contingent down there in case Basra got out of hand.

GEN. HOLMES: No, I can only imagine that in any good -- and here's where I'm just -- here I am imagining -- that any good military commander is going to have a contingency -- and I hesitate to use the word "plan," but will have a contingency concept -- that's probably the better way of putting it, because "plan" will often get misunderstood once it hits the Beltway -- would have a concept in place in order to reinforce any area that may be in trouble. I mean, that's just military tactics 101, in that you're always going to have a reserve and some concept in your mind, a branch and sequel, if you will, on how you're going to use your reserve where it's needed. But to say that there was a deliberate plan in place, no, I'm -- didn't come through my office.

I'll have to check with my partner next door. (Chuckles.)

Q Okay. Well, let's hop over to Afghanistan, then, if we can. You said you were prepared to talk about, I guess, some of the discussions within NATO about beefing up troop levels there?

GEN. HOLMES: Right. I think it's very important that we look at Bucharest as -- our secretary, you know, is preparing to go there and work with the coalition partners to garner the support of our allies for continued participation in ISAF. I think the reason that's so important is to demonstrate international resolve, which I've always said in my mind is very, very important for Afghanistan. So we've been very active in working with the Department of Defense in particularly OSD with coalition affairs in being able to assist in identifying the requirements of, you know, what's needed on the ground and then trying to best describe the capability and mission sets that would be required to meet those requirements so that we could prepare our folks for the Bucharest summit. So I'll be very interested to see what comes out of that.

As we see, you know, the French have stepped forward, offering around 2,000 people, as I recall, and we're doing a number of things there creatively to continue to work with our allies. And I think it's very, very important.

Q Well, but don't we need to get people in the right places, too? I mean, it's one thing to have French and German contingents sort of bidding their time up north, versus in south and east actually making a difference.

GEN. HOLMES: Right. And I would agree that, without singling out anyone, that yes, it's very important that our allies understand the importance of coming to the fight without caveats and without restrictions.

Q Andrew, you want to jump in here?

(Pause.)

GEN. HOLMES: Yeah, go ahead.

MR. HOLT: Andrew, you had --

Q No, sorry, I was coughing. MR. HOLT: Oh, sorry.

Q I just want to follow up on David's thing. General, the past couple weeks, going back to Pakistan and the eastern side, we've seen an awful lot of reports that we're sending -- we're using missiles, we're using drones, we're doing an awful lot; the Pakistanis are claiming that -- saying we should back off and get more involved in COIN and civil affairs. Would civil affairs and COIN work in that part of the country now, or are we a couple of years from that?

GEN. HOLMES: Are you talking about in the FATA?

Q (Coughing.) Sorry. In the where?

GEN. HOLMES: In the FATA?

Q Yeah, within the Waziristan --

GEN. HOLMES: Waziristan, in the Federally Administrated Tribal Area?

Q Correct, yes.

GEN. HOLMES: Yeah. I think -- if I back off and look at a very strategic -- take a very strategic view of that -- and your question is, would COIN and civil military operations work in that area?

Q Correct.

GEN. HOLMES: I think that's an area where yes, it could work. And I go back to recognizing that that area is in the sovereign territory of Pakistan, so what we do there or what is -- let me rephrase that, what is done there will be done under the understanding that Pakistan is a sovereign state, and is things that Pakistan will want to do or not. And I can't underscore that enough. So it's just like everything that we've done up until this point and everything we continue to do has been and should remain consistent with the agreements and understandings that we have with Pakistan.

Q Does that limit, then, our -- the past couple years of our announced global war on terror policy, where we'll root them wherever and whenever?

GEN. HOLMES: Wait, say that again. I had trouble hearing you.

Q Okay. Does this slow down or -- in the past couple years, the administration's had a policy of, on the global war of terror, we'll root them out wherever and whenever they are, and we'll do it on our terms. Is this more of a common-sense version of trying to do that, then? Because I would imagine we can't just be sending troops every place.

GEN. HOLMES: My view of that -- of basically of what you've just asked, is yes.

Q Okay. Okay, thank you.

GEN. HOLMES: And that's a very simple answer, but in my mind, especially as we look at the breadth and scope of everything that we've got to do, the more that we can share in this with a partner -- and a partner takes action that's consistent with an overall good for the community or, you know, nations of those that are willing to stand against terror -- the better. And it should not necessarily be prosecuted and conducted by U.S.-only operation.

Q Okay, thank you. GEN. HOLMES: Yeah. That's a good question, thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anything else?

Q No, I'll think of --

Q Sir, I can -- oh, sorry. Andrew, is that you?

Q Yeah, go ahead. I was just going to say, I'll think of a bunch when we hang up, and I'll -- (inaudible) -- to Captain Hasson (sp) if I do.

Q (Laughs.) Okay.

GEN. HOLMES: Yeah, Matt and Susan (sp) said they would set another one of these up pretty soon, okay?

Q Great, okay.

MR. HOLT: Okay. David, did you have another follow-up?

Q Well, sure. I mean, we can always go back to the question of resources in Afghanistan. I mean, that's sort of a perennial problem, right? But, so what about -- it seems like one of the persistent gaps in capability has been airlift, especially heavier helicopter types.

What's happening on that front?

GEN. HOLMES: Well, I know that we're -- you know, that's one of the things that we've said would be important for any ally to bring, is helo lift. But that's easy to say. When you look out there, not everybody has the robust assets that we have, and our robust assets are strong right now.

Another problem that you get to in Afghanistan -- it's more than just bring helo lift, because I know when we went in in 2001, you know, we had trouble with the Air Force 53s because they only had two engines, but the Marine 53s had three. And you needed that extra power just to get above 10,000 feet to

conduct an operation. So there's a lot that goes into saying we just need more lift. You've got to have the right kind of lift, and it's got to be able to operate in an environment that's pretty damn oppressive.

So that's a problem that -- you know, you will never get enough lift. So the -- as we say, please come and bring your resources and your capabilities. (Off mike) -- (encourage/urge ?) folks to think about what they can bring in terms of mobility and lift.

Q So you're saying the heavy lift -- it doesn't exist?

GEN. HOLMES: Say again?

Q The assets just don't exist.

GEN. HOLMES: Well, we just -- they exist, but there's just not a lot of them, you know. And countries that never thought they'd be operating in Afghanistan don't buy heavy-lift helicopters that can operate in those kinds of environments, necessarily. So it's got to be a -- just getting a lot of lift may not answer the question. It's going to be getting the right mix of lift and then having what's -- what the other lift at the right place is, so that you can expeditiously use it.

And here again, I'm not a force manager. I'm a force user. And I probably have just presented the force managers one nightmare that they would wish that I wouldn't bring up. But that's the reality of what you've got to do when you're talking about that kind of lift.

MR. HOLT: All right. Just a few more -- just another minute or so here, sir. General Holmes, do you have any closing thoughts or closing comments for us? GEN. HOLMES: No -- I would like to rejoin with you, though, simply because it's so important to me -- this whole business of irregular warfare and if I can sort of get off my fanny and finish an editorial that Susan's trying to help me get through right now, I'm probably going to offer it to you all to put out there and -- it's on irregular warfare, and let's come back and talk about it.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, let's do that.

GEN. HOLMES: That's what I'd like to do.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. We'll be looking forward to it.

Q (Off mike) -- yeah, I would like --

GEN. HOLMES: And we'll use that editorial, like I say, if we can get it out. My target's to somehow quit writing on it, because every couple of days that goes by, I get a new idea. And I've already twice said, okay, the time for new ideas is over, but I'm still rewriting on it. So we'll try to get it out in the next week or so.

MR. HOLT: Right, sir.

GEN. HOLMES: (If ?) I don't get a gag order here.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.)

GEN. HOLMES: It may be too far out in left field for everybody; I don't know. I don't think so.

Q Well, that's the beauty of COIN. It always changes. It's never static.

GEN. HOLMES: Yeah.

MR. HOLT: Well, that's also the opposite of writer's block. The only thing worse than writer's block is writer's flood.

GEN. HOLMES: Yeah. Well, see, I'm a talker, not a writer, and that's another part of the problem.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.) All right, sir. Well, we look forward to that, and we'll be working to get this rescheduled and rejoined up and get moving forward.

GEN. HOLMES: Okay, great. Thank you. And listen, thanks for doing this today. I appreciate it.

MR. HOLT: You bet.

Q Thanks. GEN. HOLMES: Okay.

Q Thanks for the time.

GEN. HOLMES: Bye.

MR. HOLT. Thank you very much.

END.